An Exploratory Study of Education Professionals' Perspectives on the Educational Needs of Students Transitioning from Foster Care to Permanency Placements

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Abstract For foster care involved children and youth, the primary goal is placement permanency into safe, supportive, and stable home environments. Although schools play an integral role in permanency planning and success during this transition, little is known about educator perspectives regarding education related transition planning and student needs. In this exploratory study we sampled education professionals' perspectives ($N = 10$) on student and caregiver educational related preparedness, supports, and primary needs through surveys and focus groups. Nearly 60% perceived students to only be "somewhat" prepared for this transition and believed caregivers to be even less prepared (70% perceived caregivers as only "somewhat" prepared). Likewise, half believed that the schools were only "somewhat" prepared, and 40% believed that schools are "not all prepared" for student transitions. Educators perceived school-based access to mental health supports as most important and academic assistance as least important to transition success. Finally, when examining educator identified recommendations for education related transition supports, four themes emerged: access to social-emotional supports, collaboration across team members, incorporating transition-based supports, and documentation related to the student's educational history and records. Discussion, limitations, and implications are provided.

Keywords Education · Foster care · Education professionals · Transition planning · Schools

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Public schools in the United States provided education to nearly 48.1 million students in 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). These settings serve a critical role in supporting the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs for all students including those with unique academic needs. School systems provide a primary protective factor for some of the most vulnerable students, including those who have been involved in the child welfare system. In 2020, nearly 632,000 children were considered systems-involved (Adoption & Foster Care Analysis Reporting System [AFCARS], 2020); many of whom will experience poor educational outcomes (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019). Although it is likely that teachers will have at least one student who is systems-involved in their classroom, many indicate they are often unaware of this student subgroup, are not familiar with population-specific academic, social, or behavioral risks, have limited knowledge of involvement in or transition from the child welfare system, and are minimally trained to address these students' unique school-related needs (Clemens

et al., 2018; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b; Noonan et al., 2012). To adequately equip school systems to assist these students during and following child welfare involvement, it is imperative to begin to understand students' comprehensive educational needs (e.g., academic, social, emotional, behavioral) and stakeholder perceptions of their preparedness to support reunifying students. Although perspectives related to comprehensive educational needs and supports have been examined with other stakeholder populations (e.g., foster parents, legal professionals. service providers, caregivers, and youths; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b; Huscroft-D'Angelo & Trout, 2022; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018), little is known about educator perspectives on the educational needs of students involved in the foster care system.

Several aspects of foster care involvement impede students' full learning potential. For example, on average, students in foster care spend approximately 20 months in the child welfare system (AFCARS, 2020). During that time, they will experience an average of three school placements, which contributes to falling nearly one and a half grade levels below their peers (Pears et al., 2015; Raush & Gallo, 2021; Smithgall, 2010). Beyond child welfare involvement, most will experience an additional transition to a permanency placement (e.g., reunification [40%], adoption [27%], guardianship [5%], kinship care [3%]; AFCARS, 2020) accompanied by a school transition. These transitions relate to disruptions in academic, social, and emotional progress. For example, when compared to nonsystems-involved students, those who have been involved in care perform lower in reading and mathematics, attain lower standardized test scores, and are more likely to be retained (Chapin Hall Center for State Child Welfare, 2011; Clemens et al., 2018; Courtney et al., 2007; National Foster Care Review Coalition, 2009; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019).
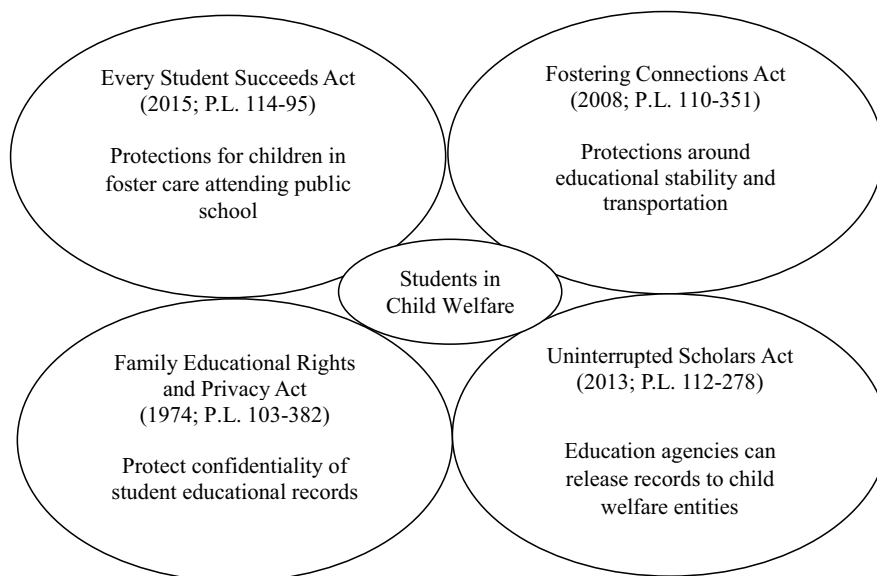
Not only do placement changes affect academic learning, but there is also substantial impact on social and emotional outcomes and stability. For example, students who have been systems-involved often experience elevated rates of missing school due to tardiness, skips, truancies, and absenteeism (Chapin Hall Center for State Child Welfare, 2011; Clemens et al., 2018; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019). This contributes to negative social-emotional consequences such as alienation and poor relationships with teachers and peers, loss of self-efficacy, and detachment from school (Basca, 2009). Overall, these factors compound the student's potential to attain positive social, emotional, and behavioral success in the school setting.

Many students who have been systems-involved also experience elevated rates of co-occurring disabilities (estimates ranging from 30% to 66%), which leads to eligibility for school-based services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Services Act (Geenen et al., 2014; Hogan, 2020; Krier et al., 2018; Slayter, 2016; Smithgall, 2010). However, due to multiple placement changes, including the transition to permanency, specialized service plans (e.g., Individualized Education Plan [IEPs], 504 plans, Student Assistance Team Plans [SATs]) are often outdated or there is limited follow-through when students move to new academic settings. This is often a result of missing school records, delayed school enrollment, and a lack of communication between schools and across service providers (Basca, 2009; Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017b; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2021a, b; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019). These frequent transitions can hinder positive social outcomes such as school engagement, involvement in extracurricular educational activities, and poorer quality relationships with teachers and peers. Over time, this limited follow-through affects long-term outcomes including school dropout, homelessness, and unemployment (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Basca, 2009; Child Trends Data Bank, 2015; National Foster Youth Initiative (NFYI), 2018; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2020; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019).

There are several federal policies (see Fig. 1) and guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) to support students who have been systems involved. For example, the guidance provided by the USDOE Students in Foster Care document (2016), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) encourages collaboration between child welfare agencies and schools, including engaging primary stakeholders. Collaboration promotes continuity of support, awareness of the student's needs, and establishing individualized supports to address both education and social-emotional needs (USDOE, 2016).

Fig. 1 Federal legislation protecting students who are systems-involved

Every Student Succeeds Act
(2015; P.L. 114-95)

Protections for children in foster care attending public school

Fostering Connections Act
(2008; P.L. 110-351)

Protections around educational stability and transportation

Students in Child Welfare

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act
(1974; P.L. 103-382)

Protect confidentiality of student educational records

Uninterrupted Scholars Act
(2013; P.L. 112-278)

Education agencies can release records to child welfare entities

Educators are instrumental to these discussions given their expertise in student learning and understanding of existing school-based academic, social, emotional, and behavioral supports. Unfortunately, not all of these legislative protections apply to students or educational settings once they transition to permanency placements. This adds to the complexity faced by students and schools during the transition and can adversely affect educational progress.

Transitions to permanency create a new set of educational challenges for students, caregivers, and schools. First, students continue to face underlying academic challenges that were present and often not addressed while in care, along with navigating new adult and peer relationships (American Psychological Association [APA], 2019; Basca, 2009; Pecora, 2012). This is turn negatively affects school connectedness and academic engagement resulting in increased educational risk (APA, 2019; Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017b; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019). Second, caregivers (e.g., biological or adoptive parents, guardians, or kinship providers) often have difficulties navigating educational systems, minimize interactions with schools, and develop poor home/school relationships due to their own educational experiences or previous experiences with their child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Ogongi, 2012; Stukes Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Finally, due to limited communication with families and stakeholders, schools may be unaware that a

student has transitioned out of the child welfare system and into permanency (Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017b; Clemens, Helm, et al., 2017a: Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). This can result in a lack of comprehensive educational planning for the student, which may contribute to elevated academic and social/emotional risk (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2021a, b; Noonan et al., 2012; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019). Overall, these challenges warrant the need to better understand how to support the educational transition from care to permanency for both families and schools in order to comprehensively address students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

Despite a lack of evidence-based practices or programs in place to address the educational transition from child welfare placement to permanency (Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b), preliminary studies have been conducted examining the overall preparedness of caregivers, students, and schools for this transition with key stakeholder groups (e.g., legal professionals, foster parents, service providers, and families; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Findings from these studies reveal an overall lack of preparedness for this transition among schools, caregivers, and students. For example, across stakeholder groups, participants perceived schools to be the least prepared (i.e., 44%–74% indicating schools are not at all prepared) and the highest percentage of participants (i.e., 62%–77%)

indicated caregivers and students are only somewhat prepared for the transition (Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b). Furthermore, these studies illuminate services and supports perceived to be integral to successful transitions, namely collaboration among service providers; access to school-based social, emotional, and mental health supports; training for education professionals; and family engagement supports (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019; Huscroft-D'Angelo & Trout, 2022; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). What remains unclear, however, is how educators perceive schools and families to be prepared for this transition and their perspectives related to educational planning and student needs.

Purpose of the Current Study

Decades of empirical literature provides context on the poor educational outcomes and school experiences of foster care involved students (Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017b; Maclean et al., 2017; Pecora & O'Brien, 2019). Given the important role that schools play in supporting students during the transition to permanency, there is critical information to be gained regarding educator perspectives of school, caregiver, and student preparedness and overall student needs. Thus, the goal of this exploratory study was to address the following research questions: (1) To what degree are caregivers, students, and schools prepared for the school transition during permanency placement? (2) What are the most important educational supports for students during the transition to permanency? and (3) What are education professionals' perceptions on the educational needs of students departing foster care to permanency placements?

Method

Participants

The University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all study procedures. We conducted two separate education professional focus groups with a total of 10 participants (i.e., 5 participants per group). We recruited participants through

partnering with several school districts within Nebraska. In particular, we provided information regarding the study and researcher contact information to administrative contacts at participating school districts who in turn shared the information with education professionals employed in the district through email and social media (e.g., Facebook). At the time of recruitment, the identities of the participant and the school district through which the participant learned of the study were unknown to the research team. Inclusion criteria for participation included: (1) current education professional (e.g., general educator, special educator, social worker, counselor, school psychologist, paraprofessional); (2) experience with children transitioning to permanency and school settings following foster care; and (3) willingness to participate in a 90-min focus group. The majority were female (90%) and white (90%). Seventy percent held a master's degree or higher and participants had on average 17 years of experience (range = 5–27 years). See Table 1 for a full description of participant demographic characteristics.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristic	N = 10
Age (years)	
25–35	2 (20%)
36–45	2 (20%)
46–55	6 (60%)
Race	
Black/African America	1 (10%)
White	9 (90%)
Gender	
Male	1 (10%)
Female	9 (90%)
Highest level of education	
Bachelor's degree	3 (30%)
Master's degree	6 (60%)
Professional school or doctoral	1 (10%)
Professional role	
General educator	4 (40%)
Special educator	2 (20%)
School psychologist	1 (10%)
Administration	3 (30%)

Measures

Prior to focus group participation, individuals completed a seven-item demographic survey and a four-item questionnaire on preparedness and importance of supports for students departing foster care, which took approximately 10 min. Survey items included: (1) three questions about the preparedness of caregivers, students, and schools for students transitioning to permanent school placements (i.e., "In general, how prepared do you think caregivers are for their child's transition back to school settings following foster care; not at all prepared, somewhat prepared, very prepared"); and (2) a rank-ordering of 10 key domains of educational supports (e.g., academic, social, homework, organization, peer) with 1 being the most important and 10 the least important.

Focus Group Procedure

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 min. To encourage participation, we scheduled meetings after school and offered on different days at the same location. Apart from day and time, all procedures were conducted in the same fashion. First, we provided participants with a short overview of the study followed by the purpose of the focus group. Next, we collected written consent and asked participants to complete the demographic transition preparedness questionnaire. Finally, we engaged participants in a structured focus group approach (described in the following section) to address the question: What are the educational needs of students departing foster care to permanency placements? We provided participants with a stipend in the form of a $50 gift card at completion.

Nominal Group Technique We engaged participants in a modified version of the nominal group technique (NGT; Delbecq et al., 1986) to answer the primary question. NGT relies on idea generation and rank ordering to efficiently gather consumer feedback in a systematic fashion. We selected the NGT method over individual interviews because it is an effective method for use in designing interventions (Krueger, 1988), provides participants with a safe environment to build off others' ideas (Madriz, 2000), provides information about specified topic(s) in a timely manner (Johnson & Turner, 2003), allows for a one-time discussion that may be replicated with other participants presenting similar characteristics (Krueger & Casey, 2000), and is an effective method for gathering information where little research has previously been conducted (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The NGT approach is widely used for research studies evaluating the preliminary stages of client-focused intervention and for program development (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b).

We applied the five-step NGT procedure in the same manner for both focus groups. To begin, we displayed the focus group question (What are the educational needs of students departing foster care to permanency placements?) on a large projection screen and gave participants 5 min to independently and silently generate as many ideas as they could think of in response to the question. We provided participants with a stack of notecards and instructions to record one idea per card. Second, a member of the research team collected the notecards, recorded each response on a Microsoft Word Document in no specific order to ensure anonymity and promote full participation. We then presented all onto the projection screen for participants to view. Third, after recording all responses, the lead researcher facilitated a group discussion to eliminate overlap, expand, and provide clarity on each generated idea. Participants condensed items through this discussion to form a finalized list. Fourth, using the final group-generated list, we asked participants to record the five ideas on a separate set of notecards they perceived as the most important (i.e., one idea per notecard). Finally, a researcher guided participants through a structured procedure to rank order each of their five selected responses (5 = most important to 1 = least important). Focus groups procedures were audio taped to ensure adherence to NGT protocol. As participant responses were recorded via notecards, we did not transcribe the audio recordings for thematic analysis, but rather solely for the purpose of capturing NGT fidelity. We checked NGT fidelity protocols and identified 100% adherence.

Data Analysis

We entered survey item data into an excel sheet, and cleaned, verified, and exported the data to SPSS 27.0.1.0 (IBM, 2021). We calculated descriptive data for the demographic and questionnaire survey items.

We then tallied focus groups items to indicate the frequency of receiving a ranking score of 5 = most important to 1 = least important based on individual participant perceptions. Finally, we summed each item to provide a total score based on the ranking scores indicated by participants and identified the percentage of respondents who ranked the individual item in their top five.

Results from NGT focus groups are largely identified during the final ranking of ideas, therefore, analysis was focused on the synthesis of results across the two focus groups. To synthesize data, we completed the following steps and qualitative analysis (later described). First, immediately after each focus group, the moderator and lead researchers generated a preliminary results list based on the notes and final ranking of ideas. Second, the preliminary results lists were aggregated and synthesized to generate a final results list used for thematic analysis across both focus groups to determine if common themes emerged.

Thematic analysis (Caulfield, 2019; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify themes across both focus groups. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting potential themes that may exist within a dataset and is widely used to address a variety of research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). We employed a six-step approach to identify common themes from participant generated ideas presented as written responses on note cards (Caulfield, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). To begin, the first and third authors familiarized themselves with the dataset (Caulfield, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017) by reviewing all of the independent ideas that were generated among each of the focus group participants. Second, we developed a coding approach to ensure all raters coded written responses in a similar matter, adhering to a minimum of 80% reliability among the two raters. Third, we conducted analytical coding of participant responses across groups to generate initial potential thematic categories. Fourth, raters shared initial independently established themes with one another, discussed how the themes were derived, and rationales for grouping of ideas into thematic categories. Fifth, we agreed up final thematic categories as they related to student educational needs during the transition from foster care to permanency placements. Raters then independently placed the 44 unique items into the agreed upon themes. Finally, we calculated reliability data between raters for the placement of the 44 unique ideas into thematic categories.

Results

Preparedness for Transition

Regarding the preparedness of caregivers for their child's transition to school settings, 70% reported perceiving caregivers to be "somewhat" prepared for this transition and 30% reported caregivers to be "not at all" prepared. In terms of child preparedness for transitioning to school settings, 60% of participants reported perceiving students as "somewhat" prepared, 30% indicated "not at all" prepared, and 10% reported students to be "very prepared." When examining perspectives of school preparedness, 50% reported schools to be "somewhat" prepared, 40% felt schools to be "not at all" prepared, and 10% perceived schools to be "very prepared."

Importance of Educational Support

Based on a mean rank calculation (1 = most important to 10 = least important) for the importance of educational supports for students departing foster care, education professionals rated mental health/trauma (e.g., accessing mental health; attending scheduled appointments; $M = 1.90$; $SD = 1.29$), relationships (e.g., developing peer/adult relationship skills, identifying trusting relationships; $M = 2.90$; $SD = 1.66$), and family supports (e.g., developing caregiver involvement in school; developing positive home/school relationships; $M = 4.60$; $SD = 2.55$) as most important. Supports rated of less importance included homework supports (e.g., homework completion plans, homework notebook; $M = 8.90$; $SD = 1.66$), organizational supports (e.g., checklists, organizational folders; $M = 8.70$; $SD = 1.06$), and academic supports (e.g., specific academic interventions, direct instruction; $M = 5.90$; $SD = 2.23$).

Educational Needs

Across the focus groups, the education professionals generated a total of 44 unique responses, with a distribution of 27 and 17 for Groups 1 and 2, respectively. Tables 2 and 3 present items ranked by participants

as a top five rating, corresponding Total Score, and percentage of participants who rated the item in the top five.

Of the 27 total responses generated by Group 1 (see Table 2), the most important needs included support for educational plans (e.g., IEPs and 504 plans),

Table 2 Education professionals Group A ($N = 5$) findings related to perceptions of necessary educational needs for families experiencing the transition from foster care to permanency placements

Item	Total Score[a]	% of Respondents Ranking Item in Top 5[b]
Transition supports (relationship supports, social/emotional supports, check for basic needs)	9	40%
Need for schools to collaborate with placement agencies about the transition	9	40%
Need for the team at school to understand the impact of placement (training, understanding foster care system, relationships)	7	40%
Getting involved in extracurricular activities	7	40%
Including the child in the educational and transitional process	6	40%
Transition checklists	6	40%
Seamless transfer of school records (cumulative records of entire academic history)	5	40%
Lack of connection or point person at school to ease transition	5	20%
Emotional supports at school	4	40%
Communication among education professionals when a child is in care or departing care	4	20%
Ongoing relationship between foster child and home school (maintaining peer and adult relationships)	3	20%
Academic supports to address learning gaps	3	20%
Social skills support	3	20%
Transcript review for course credits (graduation)	2	40%
Recognition of IEPS, MDT work, change of guardianship paperwork	2	20%

[a] = Reflects the scores of the highest scored items across participants. Higher scores are indicative of supports ranked as most important during the transition from foster care to permanency placement. [b] = Indicates the percent of participants' ranking the item as a top five ranked need necessary for a successful transition from foster care to permanency placement

Table 3 Education Professionals Group B ($N = 5$) findings related to perceptions of necessary educational needs for families experiencing the transition from foster care to permanency placements

Item	Total Score[a]	% of Respondents Ranking Item in Top 5[b]
Social emotional learning/coping strategies (e.g., how to make friends, accept no, etc.)	21	100%
Strong and trusting adult relationships within the school	13	80%
Social emotional needs/support	11	60%
Family relationship and open communication with school admin/counselor/teacher / new family support between home and school	10	60%
Communication/back story to school	6	60%
Therapeutic resources – available and accessible emotional/mental health services	5	40%
Closing any "gaps" in academics like missed curriculum while in foster care	4	40%
Transitional planning	4	20%
Academic work support	1	20%

[a] Reflects the scores of the highest scored items across participants. Higher scores are indicative of supports ranked as most important during the transition from foster care to permanency placement. [b]Indicates the percent of participants' ranking the item as a top five ranked need necessary for a successful transition from foster care to permanency placement

open communication between team members about the student transition, and knowledge of all school-based services available to the student (e.g., breakfast, assistive technology). Group 2 (see Table 3) generated 17 total responses, of which the most important needs involved mental health supports (e.g., school staff educated on trauma-informed care, mental health, and trauma-informed help for students) and forming relationships with a trusted adult at school.

Themes across Focus Groups Although participants generated 44 distinct ideas for supporting the educational needs of students departing foster care, four common themes emerged from the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caulfield, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017; see Table 4). Themes included: (1) collaboration among team members; (2) documentation of educational history and records; (3) school-based transition support; and (4) social-emotional supports.

When examining overarching themes, raters had 100% reliability identifying the four areas and 93% reliability on placing the 44 distinct ideas into the broader themes.

Discussion

Education professionals play a critical role in supporting students involved in foster care. In many cases, students spend more time in school settings than in any other environment. As such, education professionals have an intimate knowledge of the needs that students in foster care have in order to attain academic success. Three primary areas (preparedness for, importance of educational supports, and the educational needs of systems-involved students during the transition to permanency) were the focus of this exploratory study. Highlights were

Table 4 Themes of educational needs generated across education professional top-rated items

Theme	Responses Categorized into Theme
Collaboration among team members	Communication among education professionals when a child is in or departing care
	Family relationship and open communication with school admin/counselor/teacher/new family support between home and school
	Including the child in the educational and transitional process
	Lack of connection or point person at school to ease transition
	Need for schools to collaborate with placement agencies about the transition
	Need for the team at school to understand the impact of placement (training, understanding foster care system, relationships)
	Strong and trusting adult relationships within the school
Documentation of educational records and history	Communication/back story to school
	Recognition of IEPS, MDT work, change of guardianship paperwork
	Seamless transfer of school records (cumulative records of entire academic history)
	Transcript review for course credits (graduation)
	Transition Checklist
School-based transition supports	Academic supports to address learning gaps
	Academic work support
	Closing any "gaps" in academics like missed curriculum while in foster care
	Getting involved in extracurricular activities
	Transition Checklist
	Transition supports (relationship supports, social/emotional supports, check for basic needs)
	Transitional planning
Social-emotional support	Emotional supports at school
	Ongoing relationship between foster child and home school (maintaining peer and adult relationships)
	Social emotional learning/coping strategies (e.g., how to make friends, accept no)
	Social emotional needs/support
	Social skills support
	Therapeutic resources—available and accessible emotional/mental health services

noted in each area. Although preliminary, these findings identify target areas and specific actions that education stakeholders can consider when planning for the educational transition to permanency of systems-involved students.

Preparedness for Transition

When examining overall preparedness, education professionals did not perceive caregivers, students, or schools to be "very prepared" for the transition from foster care to school settings. Participants viewed schools at the least prepared with nearly half of (40%) reporting schools to be "not at all prepared" for the transition to permanency. These results are similar to previous studies of other stakeholder populations (e.g., foster parents, service providers, legal professionals), which reveal limited preparedness across groups, with schools consistently rated as being the least prepared (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; Huscroft-D'Angelo & Trout, in press; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b).

Given the role of schools in supporting students who have been involved in child welfare, all stakeholders (e.g., caregivers, students, and schools) should be adequately prepared to support these students, particularly during the transition. Students in general spend an average of 33.2 hr per week in educational settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), which serves as a protective factor for students in foster care, including those who transition to permanency (Development Services Group, Inc.,, & Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). There are substantial educational and financial consequences when stakeholders are not prepared to support this population in educational settings. Unfortunately, many students who have been systems-involved often experience alternative education placements (Maclean et al., 2017; McNaught et al., 2017; USDOE, 2016), which on average can cost districts up to $10,000 (Marino, 2017). Finding ways to prepare schools and education professionals to adequately prepare youth for the transition to schools could provide both a cost savings, build confidence of schools in supporting this sub-population, and produce a pathway towards students' educational progress.

Importance of Educational Supports

When asked to rank the importance of supports in targeted domains of transition supports, education professionals identified access to mental health/trauma supports as most important. This finding aligns with previous stakeholder perspectives on the importance of access to mental health and trauma focused educational supports for systems involved students (Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b). Given the elevated rates of mental health disorders (Courtney & Charles, 2015; Engler et al., 2022; Keefe et al., 2021; Williams-Mbengue, 2016) and associated behaviors among those who have been involved in foster care (Engler et al., 2022; Keefe et al., 2021; Williams-Mbengue, 2016), it was not surprising that along with other stakeholder groups, education professionals also perceived this to be the most important area to provide supports during this pivotal transition. It is important to also recognize how poor mental health impedes a student's ability to engage in school environments (Annie E. Casey, 2014; Bertram, 2018; Engler et al., 2022; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018; Sebba et al., 2015). Linking students to additional supports within educational settings that can bolster mental health, increase engagement within school environments, and promote positive social relationships may reduce the level in which mental health prohibits students from achieving academic success (Development Services Group, Inc.,, & Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018).

Along with understanding areas in which education professionals view as most important, it was somewhat surprising to identify areas they perceived to be of less importance, in particular those directly related to academic functioning (e.g., academic, homework, and organizational supports). Although this is likely a reflection of viewing a student's mental health status as a priority, there is also value in providing appropriately aligned academic supports that may offset some of the challenges associated to poor social and emotional functioning (Bertram, 2018; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Students who have been involved in foster care display numerous academic risks which are further elevated by each placement changes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Clemens, Klopfenstein, et al., 2017b; Clemens et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential to identify and

integrate academic supports that are aligned to individual students needs to promote positive educational outcomes during the transition to permanency period.

Educational Need

Participants offered unique insight into the specific educational needs of students during the transition to reunification, generating ideas that fell collectively into four major themes. Themes included team member collaboration, student documentation (e.g., access to educational records and history), and the implementation of both social-emotional and school-based transition supports. Each theme provides a better understanding of specific actions and ways in which schools might feel better prepared to support this student population.

Participants acknowledged the need to establish effective collaboration among team members. Although facets of collaboration are written into existing legislation (ESSA, 2015; Fostering Connections Act, 2008; Uninterrupted Scholars Act, 2013), strongly encouraged by the USDOE (2016), and recommended as a best practice approach for meeting the needs of this population, it remains unclear how or if these communications occur (Annie E. Casey, 2014, Clemens, Helm, et al., 2017a; Kelly, 2015; Public Broadcasting Service, 2016). Students who have been involved in foster care often have many professionals who have been responsible for their care (e.g., agencies, service providers, family, schools), each of whom provide a unique contribution the transition planning process. Therefore, prioritizing the development of strong school, community, home collaborations is a logical first step in supporting students' educational needs. For schools, this could be integrated into a systems-support framework or established as a process outside of the formalized system to identify when students enter and exit care. Too often schools are unaware of a student's status within foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; Clemens, Helm, et al., 2017a; Moyer & Goldberg, 2020; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2018), which contributes to the school being inadequately prepared to best support the student in educational settings. Collaboration with agencies contributes to the school's understanding of the student's educational needs and has been identified as an important element of transition in prior research (Child Welfare Information Gateway,

2016; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; McNaught et al., 2017). Establishing these relationships along with identifying a contact person within each stakeholder entity (e.g., school, agency, service provider, family) promotes effective communication, school stability, and positive educational outcomes.

When meaningful collaborations are intact, more efficient processes for gathering student documentation can be established. This was another area that education professionals perceived as integral to supporting students' needs during the transition. Although there are existing legislative protections (e.g., ESSA, FERPA) that promote access to and communication of individual student records, stakeholders continue to identify challenges with ensuring a seamless transfer of educational files (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2019; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Poling, & Trout, 2021a; Huscroft-D'Angelo, Trout, et al., 2021b). The following steps should be taken to ensure schools obtain a comprehensive understanding of the transitioning student's unique needs. First, schools should identify an individual within the school setting who is responsible for managing educational records and gathering a "Release of Information or Records" (ROI/ROR) for every prior school placement. Second, upon completing the records gathering, schools should conduct a thorough review of the students' previous services and supports (e.g., special education, 504 plans, counseling, tutoring), evaluations (e.g., academic, social/emotional), and educational strengths and limitations to establish a foundational guidebook that can be used to help seamlessly integrate the student into the new setting. Third, for secondary students, schools should conduct a review of courses taken, and credits earned to establish student credit standing and needs for graduation.

After establishing proficient systems to support collaboration and student record documentation, school personnel will be better prepared to address the third theme identified by the school professionals, developing plans that are individualized to best support student transition (e.g., see Table 4, transition checklists, planning, academic work support, establishing involvement in extracurricular activities). Educational stability is a strong predictor of future life-long success for all students, in particular for systems involved students (McNaught et al., 2017). As mentioned earlier, when stability is disrupted, it can have profound negative implications for students who have been

involved in foster care (Clemens et al., 2018; ESSA, 2015; McNaught et al., 2017). By implementing practices such as those identified by the participants in this study and recommended by federal agencies (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016; USDOE, 2016), schools can create a stable and supportive setting for students to succeed. This includes establishing routines within the educational environment that allow students and families to orient to the school as well as build foundational relationships. For example, school staff might assist families with timely school enrollment, conduct private school tours, develop course schedules based on student academic history, provide explanations of school policies and procedures, facilitate introductions to both teachers and peers, and identify student interest in school clubs or sports. Overall, these actions can help students feel connected to the educational setting and promote overall school engagement (APA, 2019; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2018; McNaught et al., 2017).

Finally, it is encouraging that education professionals identified several types of social emotional needs (e.g., relationships between home and school, social/emotional learning, social skills training) important to address during the educational transition. Healthy social emotional development is critical for children and adolescents because of the life-long impact on productivity as adults (CDC, 2018; Malti & Noam, 2016). Unfortunately, social and emotional development is often hindered due to the adverse conditions associated with foster care involvement (Pears et al., 2015; Williams-Mbengue, 2016) and further exacerbated by additional placement changes, including the transition to permanency (Pears et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that facilitators of success, such as proficient social/emotional skills can prevent negative long-term consequences and serve as protective factors for students involved in foster care (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). For example, well developed social-emotional skills that promote positive peer and teacher relationships can increase contact with reinforcement in the school environment and mediate the social isolation that results from foster care placements (Conroy, 2016). This leads to developing students who are connected to the educational environment (e.g., high attendance, positive school relationships, engaged in school activities), more likely to remain in school, and attain greater

academic success (APA, 2019; CDC, 2018; Pears et al., 2015). Empowering educators through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., training, awareness of existing school-based supports, use of evidence-based strategies) to understand the social/emotional needs of this population can promote successful transitions and place students on a path to achieve positive outcomes across various domains.

Limitations

Findings should be considered in conjunction with several potential limitations. First, we recruited participants from one state located in Nebraska. Although the participants represented various schools, districts, and settings (e.g., public, private), the size, available resources, and services offered to students and families may influence their perspectives. Thus, findings related to perceptions of preparedness, transition planning, and educational needs may differ based on where the school district is located (e.g., suburban, rural) and the various demographics of students (e.g., socioeconomic status, student risk level) limiting generalizability. Future research should be conducted with a larger, more diverse sample of education professionals that includes the addition of an extended demographic variable list (e.g., school level, experience with students in child welfare) to capture broad perspectives and experiences based on geographic location or student demographics. A second limitation is the small sample size and the inability to examine data by education professional subgroups. Replication studies are needed to examine educator perspectives across broad geographic locations, diverse settings (i.e., urban), and within education professional role (i.e., general education, special education, social workers, school psychologists, administrators). Third, due to the structure and systematic approach of the NGT process, we did not conduct additional in-depth interviews and/or facilitate discussion among participants. It is possible that additional themes or relevant information may be discovered through one-to-one interviews. Thus, future research should be conducted allowing for more open-ended discussion to occur among education professionals. Finally, as with any self-report or interview data, there could be bias, due to social desirability, based on experience, inaccurate recall, or ability to respond to questions.

Conclusions

The perspectives of stakeholders working to meet the needs of children in foster care are integral to understanding and making progress in developing practices that can be successful to support educational outcomes. Although preliminary studies have been conducted to better understand overall preparedness, perceptions of important supports, and the educational needs of this population, very little is known about comprehensive transition supports for this population. This includes what supports currently exist in educational settings, how often they are accessing supports, and what is in place to assist students and schools during the educational transition. Therefore, future research should replicate and extend the current study. For example, replication with a larger group of education professionals that includes various roles within the school, caregivers, and students. Each stakeholder group provides unique contributions to the transition process, thus further evaluations of this critical time period will help to develop and implement effective educational transition supports, tailor services that are individualized to student needs, and promote positive short- and long-term educational success.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest All authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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